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ABSTRACT

Students in college composition courses should experiment with a variety of discourse styles--referential, persuasive, literary, and expressionistic--as opposed to a more traditional focus on the mastery of academic discourse. David Bartholomae assigns freshmen writers the goal of becoming like academics by assuming a "language not their own." However, the attainment of such a goal may not be best served by privileging academic discourse alone, for three reasons: undergraduates do not have access to a single community of scholars; they do not usually communicate ideas requiring academic discourse; and students may have a fairly clear idea of what they need. Instead, teachers might superimpose the model of the assimilation of discourse as introduced in Mikhail Bakhtin's essay, "Discourse in the Novel," thereby downplaying the privileging of one style over another. For Bakhtin, assimilation is the process of turning authoritative discourse into internally persuasive discourse. Several points concerning Bakhtinian assimilation suggest a different climate for the composition classroom: (1) Bakhtin does not rank internally persuasive discourse over authoritative discourse; (2) Bakhtin does not privilege any particular style of discourse; and (3) assimilation is both subjective and selective. The goal of composition instructors should be to create an environment in which a number of languages can be tried on like hats, allowing the customers to choose whichever is most suitable. Thus, instead of enforcing a particular style, teachers should listen more closely to the voices presented by their students. (HB)

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Ed Federenko

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Not Hearing Voices: Bakhtin and Development in the Composition Classroom

The freshman composition classroom is a hothouse for authority. The authority of university requirements obliges students to appear for one (or maybe two) semesters of freshman writing; various discourse styles speak to students with more authority than they may have done in high school English classes, especially as students are now often closer to the source; and presiding over all is the authority of the instructor, a would-be counselor who is more often perceived as judge and jury. In short, the freshman composition classroom--this hothouse for authority--just happens to be an excellent environment for young writers.

Yet at the beginning of each semester when I ask my students what they need to become better, more confident writers, about twelve out of twenty invariably list better grammar, better spelling, better vocabulary. My first impulse is to ask what about critical thinking? What about a deeper investment of self in the process of writing? What about questioning authority through writing? But I have come to see, in their desire for improved mechanical skills, an implicit faith in technique that should not be brushed aside as merely naive.

For when someone like David Bartholomae offers what appears to be a more sophisticated goal for freshman writers--to learn academic discourse--it seems to me that he and my students occupy some common ground. After all, Bartholomae says this: "the student must, by writing, become like us--English teachers, adults, intellectuals, academics. He must become someone he is not. He must know what we know, talk like we talk; he must locate himself convincingly in a

CS213342

language that is not his own" (300). Are students, then, so far off the mark if they rely on language's outward trappings-- grammar, spelling, vocabulary (of the correct sort)--as proof that they have, indeed, successfully taken on that language?

Because what Bartholomae suggests, students instinctively know: that they have been summoned to our classrooms to learn to write something they don't already know how to write, or don't feel comfortable writing, and that they will not be judged adequate in their college careers until they can do so. So often, the language-not-their-own that students are being asked to adopt is the language of the academy. This should not, and perhaps does not, surprise them. After all, students are taught, for the most part, by academics. Naturally academics will privilege their own discourse, attributing to it all that there is of logic, clarity, and purpose. This may be due, in part, to the fact that academics themselves have struggled hard to master it.

My contention is that students are entitled to a similar struggle. But I question whether learning academic discourse offers the only, or even the best, opportunity. Certainly, to see a student involved in a struggle for mastery over academic discourse might convince us of its singular value as the raw material of the learning process. But to learn any and all discourse styles requires an equal struggle. As instructors of writing, shouldn't we encourage and prepare students to approach all discourse styles--referential, but also persuasive, literary, and expressionistic--with the same care, and perhaps minus the same faults, that academics bring to academic discourse?

Aside from the obvious value of exposing students to a range of discourse that would result, there are other good reasons not to

privilege the academic in freshman composition classrooms. First, our students do not have access to the homogenous discourse community that academics do. That is, they do not have a community of scholars in any one discipline as their audience. Second, they are not always communicating ideas that require academic discourse, and this is often the case as a direct result of our own writing prompts. Thus, to encourage students to concentrate only on academic discourse contradicts our efforts to increase awareness of different kinds of audience. Third, perhaps as a response to tougher job markets, students, even in their first year, often have fairly clear ideas of what they need. More to the point, almost all of them have fairly clear ideas of what they like, and what a student likes greatly influences what a student learns. This is not to argue that students should learn only the discourse style that appeals to them at the moment, but rather that they might learn best from the discourse style that most appeals to them, and then, having learned what it is to learn, they will find that other discourse styles will come more easily. This, then, is an appeal to meet students wherever they happen to be.

Unfortunately, we often take a different approach to teaching writing. We often seem to play one style of discourse against another, privileging now academic writing, now expressionistic discourse, always with a preordained conviction that we know what has value for our students. But perhaps it would be more productive to present the entire range intact and to offer students a greater role in setting their own agendas. In his essay "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin introduces the idea of the assimilation of discourse; his model offers something that we might superimpose over the range of discourse styles, something that

might help us to downplay the privileging of one style over another. To think of what goes on in the classroom in terms of assimilation may help us to shift the emphasis to the learning process itself as it applies to the development of writers.

For Bakhtin the individual is always situated, in respect to a particular discourse, at a shifting point between unquestioning acceptance of its authority and a more dynamic reaction to its persuasiveness. If the discourse is authoritative, it can only be accepted in its entirety; it resembles sacred writ. If, on the other hand, the discourse is internally persuasive, it invites interaction; it has the potential to be conjoined, through dialogism, with one's own words. In Bakhtin's helpful analogy, authoritative discourse corresponds to the school-child's act of "reciting by heart," while internally persuasive discourse is akin to "retelling in one's own words" (341). What is at stake in the process of assimilation, a process that turns authoritative discourse into internally persuasive discourse, is nothing less than what Bakhtin describes as one's "ideological becoming" (341).

There are four points about assimilation that I would like to raise breifly; they suggest a different climate for the composition classroom. First of all, Bakhtin does not rank internally persuasive discourse over authoritative discourse, however much he may be attracted to the more dynamic qualities of the former. As Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson explain, "Bakhtin does <u>not</u> mean to suggest that mere hostility to authority is a mark of maturity. Nor does he mean to condemn agreement with authority as a mark of immaturity or irresponsibility" (220). The point is that there is no winner, no over-

achieving devourer of authoritative discourse who gets the prize; we each have our own appropriate rate of assimilation. Second, Bakhtin does not privilege a particular style of discourse. He would not have us waste our energy arguing for the primacy of one style of discourse. To do so, in fact, would be to turn one's back on the dialogism at the heart of Bakhtin's thinking. As Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist explain, words become dialogized when they are "relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions for the same thing" (427). To privilege a particular style, then, would be to turn the goal of freshman composition into that of asking writers to seek a unified, monologized--and authoritative--voice.

My last two points are better presented simultaneously. Assimilation, for Bakhtin, is both subjective and selective (341). Subjective in that what speaks authoritatively or with internal persuasiveness is as personal as one's own thought processes. In fact, Bakhtin would say, the one is directly responsible for the other. Selective because among all that we hear as authoritative, only a portion can be used as raw material for assimilation at any particular time, and this selection process is not only highly personal, it is often hidden from the individual even as it happens. We could certainly attempt to scope out where our students are in relation to various discourse styles, and indeed, we should never stop trying to do exactly that. But the subjective and selective--the highly personal--nature of assimilation should caution us in our approach. For not only do individual writers have unique needs, their manner of meeting those needs is unpredictable and ever-changing from writing task to writing task.

To read our students in a Bakhtinian sense would be to become sensitive to two things: first, where particular students are situated along the range of discourse styles (i.e. what attracts them right now, in the first or second semester of their first year of college) and second, how comfortable they are, how far along they are in the process of assimilating that discourse style. Sensitivity to these two coordinates and a willingness to let momentum work for, not against, a developing writer, would do much to shift attention from a particular discourse, to the act of learning whatever discourse speaks for individual students.

How do we know these things about our students? As experienced readers, we are probably already picking up the clues we need by the time we see their second or third essays. Is the student consistently drawn to the discourse style she reads in text books, or does she presently insist on using the most conversational style she can (complete with parenthetical asides to the reader that more often than not end with exclamation points)? And, does she handle the style gracefully or awkwardly, or with some uneven combination of the two? Often we note these qualities only to revert to the question of how to wean our students away from whatever it is they're doing. In the process we miss out on the opportunity to ask the student, in whatever way we can, either directly or with true Socratic stealth, just why they are where they are, and what force has pulled them there.

What might we do once we know what we know? Although Bakhtin speaks of development in the most universal of terms (and never, alas, refers to college freshmen), passages in "Discourse in the Novel" are ripe for adaptation to the composition classroom. I have time for just

one example. Bakhtin speaks of the idea of "fusing" internally persuasive discourse with what he calls "the image of a speaking person." He suggests several directions for this writing activity: "ethical (discourse fused with the image of, let us say, a preacher), philosophical (discourse fused with the image of a wise man), sociopolitical (discourse fused with an image of a Leader)" (347). He goes on to explain that, "[w]hile creatively stylizing upon and experimenting with another's discourse, we attempt to guess, to imagine, how a person with authority might conduct himself in the given circumstances" (347). Thus, a student who has displayed an interest in political discourse might consciously attempt to explore a particular issue in the voice of George Bush. What I want to stress is that the writing should go beyond mere parody (although parody would be a starting point), and should require the writer to put on the mantle of authority while grappling with an issue that has real personal significance. Students might similarly be invited to fuse internally persuasive discourse with styles borrowed from various walks of life, various time periods, and social groups, so that the creative act of putting on different voices merges with the students' real connection with what is already speaking persuasively to them.

This brings us back to Bartholomae's vision of what should happen in the composition classroom, but with an important difference. Rather than say that the student must "locate himself convincingly in a language not his own," and that the language is none other than the local dialect spoken by academics, we could create an environment in which a number of languages can be tried on like hats in a hat store,

the customer always free to walk out without making a purchase, at least not today.

Bakhtin reminds us that our notion of authoritative discourse may, from the student's point of view, miss the point entirely. In spite of all the authority at our command, we cannot presume to know or say what will be authoritative for anyone else. Every student will have a different list. While it undoubtedly will at times include our own cherished styles, the list may also include that which we might prefer to ignore or to relegate to a "B" list.

We always risk losing those students who do not hear the voices we have picked out for them to thrill to, but we needn't lose them. That is, unless we merely want them to hear and appreciate what we do. If we want them to learn how writers write, how thinkers think, we should open our ears to what students hear. They aren't the only ones not hearing voices.

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